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ABSTRACT

The Connecticut Program for Handicapped/Talented Children was designed to devise an assessment procedure for documenting developed or potential talent in handicapped children and to provide program services for handicapped children with high creative potential. Multi-arts experiences in the areas of visual arts, music, and theatre-movement have been developed as a flexible and accurate technique for identifying exceptional undeveloped talent in low-functioning children. (SB)

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project *SEARCH*
(title VIb, EHA)

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A Progress Report on the Connecticut Program for Handicapped/Talented Children

In March 1975, a proposal was prepared by DeWitt Zuse and Laura Smaus for submission to the Connecticut State Department of Education to initiate a Title VIB, EHA, project to identify and develop programs for handicapped/talented children. This project sought to combine the resources of the two largest educational agencies in Connecticut: the Area Cooperative Educational Services (ACES) and the Capitol Region Education Council (CREC). These two agencies operate numerous special education programs which serve approximately five hundred students with a variety of disabilities including emotionally disturbed, physically handicapped, learning disabled, autistic, mentally retarded, hearing impaired and multiple handicaps.

The object of the first phase of the project was to devise an assessment procedure for documenting developed or potential talent in children who have handicaps. The second phase of the project will focus on program services for handicapped children with high creative potential.

Initially, identification of children was through teacher referral and administration of selected activities from the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking in a specially adapted form devised by project personnel. Both of these identification methods are used as supplementary screening devices.

While there are numerous traditional methods for identifying intellectual ability, and several for assessing talent in the arts, no satisfactory technique exists for identifying exceptional undeveloped talent in low-functioning children. In the search for a new approach the project asked the professional artists affiliated with the Educational Center for the Arts in New Haven to develop such an instrument. The key component of the present identification system - and the most significant original contribution which Project SEARCH has made to the field of talent assessment - is the use of artistic judgment in a variety of carefully structured activities. Teams of practicing professional artists have developed and sucessfully implemented multi-arts experiences which provide flexible and accurate measurement for the various special populations.

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It has been a continuing challenge for the artists to devise problems and activities to which even very severely handicapped children can respond. To assist in this task, teachers and consultants have provided background information and training in the nature and parameters of specific disabilities. During this period of time, artists did preliminary work with small numbers of children while constantly refining their assessment techniques. As most of the handicapped children have had only limited exposure to these art forms, we do not expect to find fully developed talent; rather, we are looking for the dimensions of creativity which underlie a variety of human activities.

It soon became apparent that while creative thinking processes may manifest themselves in a variety of fields, the project staff could produce the most effective results by concentrating its efforts in the areas of Visual Arts, Music, and Theatre-Movement. Some of the activities which have been developed for this identification process are described briefly below.

The Visual Arts activities encompass three problem-solving areas or skills: design, color-relationships, and narrative composition.

> The design segment uses various multi-colored cubes in a tray to assess the child's ability to create patterns, shapes, and figures with the cubes.
>
> Color-relationship skills are measured by having the child create designs and combinations using various modular shaped pieces of colored plexi-glass on a light table.
>
> Cut-outs of semi-abstract and realistic objects, with a suitable backdrop, are used to help the child develop a narrative or tell a story in a situation where effective speech is limited.

The musicians have the children explore the sound making properties of common objects in their classroom environment.

> Children are then asked to combine these sounds for auditory prospects and rhythm and to develop compositions which are then judged for originality and complexity.

The Theatre-Movement specialists have devised activities to measure the child's sensory awareness and emotions through gesture, facially, in role playing, dramatics, and creative movement.

> Children who are capable are asked to use different parts of their bodies to express a wide range of emotions, interpretive responses, and behavioral relationships.
>
> Simple objects such as scarves, elasticized fabrics, and hoops, are used to determine the child's ability to improvise and to assess originality in the use of these body extensions.

A creative movement evaluation, based on Rudolf Laban's movement themes, is used to identify body awareness, action and shape variation, movement pattern variation, and awareness of weight, time and tension.

The use of these multi-arts activities which have been designed to elicit rich creative responses from the children, coupled with on-the-spot professional judgments, have proved to be an extremely strong evaluation technique. The project coordinator is presently devising guidelines for other program developers who wish to assess the creative potential of children in these three talent areas. In addition, the project is publishing a document summarizing the rationale and procedures for assessing cognitive giftedness in six areas of disability.

What has emerged very clearly from our work thus far is the remarkable potential of a number of these children. While the abilities may be masked or submerged by the handicapping condition, full assessment of all exceptional children must include a rigorous search for exceptional strengths as well as deficits. In some cases identification and training during ensuing years of the project may provide a viable career choice. For the majority of our students it is hoped that the program will provide an opportunity for fulfilling growth and self-realization.

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